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ABSTRACT

This paper applies some of the research done on small group decision-making to the process of identification and selection of colleges by high school students. It argues that, since the decisions that are reached are often group decisions, or are at least strongly influenced by groups, an understanding of group decision-making processes can be helpful to the college admission counselor. Several formats that counselors might use to facilitate a family's decision-making and to identify factors which either promote or impede the decision-making process are described. Six steps of the reflective thinking process are explained: (1) problem identification; (2) problem analysis; (3) criteria; (4) possible solutions; (5) evaluation; and (6) selection of the best solution. Counselors are encouraged to keep the steps of reflective thinking in mind when attempting to facilitate a family's discussion. An alternative to the reflective thinking method, the single question method, is also described. Five steps of the single question method are listed and the purpose of the approach is explained. A section on team research discusses recent research on team effectiveness and how results of that research might be used by counselors when assisting a student and his/her family in making a college selection. (NB)

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DECISION MAKING FROM A SMALL GROUP PERSPECTIVE

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Decision Making From A Small Group Perspective

Many individuals are generally involved in the decision making process whenever students identify the colleges to which they will apply or select the college they will attend from the acceptances they receive. Consequently, counselors often work not just with the students themselves, but with the students' families and perhaps others as well. Since the decisions that are reached are often group decisions, or are at least strongly influenced by groups, an understanding of group decision making processes can be helpful to the college admission counselor. The purpose of this paper is to describe some formats that counselors might use to facilitate a family's decision making, and to identify factors which facilitate and impede the decision making process.

The Reflective Thinking Process.

Group communication theory and research suggest that a family's decision making would be facilitated if the family members followed an inquiry pattern similar to the reflective thinking process suggested by John Dewey and developed for small group situations by McBurney and Hance and others over the years. The process of reflective thinking involves the following six steps:

I. Problem identification

Good decisions require a clear understanding on the part of every family member of the problem the family is attempting to

solve. A question such as "What schools should Joe or Sally apply to?" might be much too general. A better question might be "What private schools should Joe or Sally apply to which have a good pre-law program and which are located in the northwest." Unless the question is clear, sufficiently specific, and adequately discussed so that it is understood by everyone participating in the discussion, a good decision will be hard to reach.

II. Problem Analysis

There is a tendency on the part of groups to search for solutions prematurely. Decisions are more likely to be worthwhile if families devote more time to the analysis of the problem. What are the student's goals, desires, social needs, expectations, motivations, and abilities? What are the family's resources? What importance should be given to the schools the student's friends are applying to? These and other questions should be discussed before possible schools are considered.

III. Criteria

Group decision making can be facilitated if the group members can reach a good understanding of the criteria they will use in evaluating possible solutions to the problem they are discussing. When selecting schools, cost, location, size, reputation and atmosphere are just some of the criteria which might be agreed upon. These criteria will be helpful in evaluating possible solutions to the problem.

IV. Possible Solutions

This step involves the actual identification of schools the student might seriously consider attending. An initial long

list can be developed and then paired down. The criteria identified in step three might be used here to decide whether a school should be included in this list.

V. Evaluation

This step involves a thorough discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution. The strengths and weaknesses of each school selected in step four should be discussed, using the criteria identified earlier and any other standards introduced at this time.

VI. Selection of the best solution

The actual schools to apply to should be relatively easy to identify at this point if sufficient time has been devoted by the family to each of the previous steps.

The steps of reflective thinking need not be followed in a rigid manner. However, there is good reason to believe that groups will be more successful if they avoid searching for solutions before they analyze the problem, identify criteria for evaluating possible solutions, and consider the advantages and disadvantages of many possible solutions before they attempt to reach an agreement. Counselors should be able to facilitate a family's discussion more effectively if they keep the steps of reflective thinking in mind.

The Single Question Method

The single question method is an alternative to the reflective thinking method. It works very successfully for many groups. The distinguishing feature of the single question method is the strong

emphasis it places on the identification and resolution of issues. The single question method involves the following five steps:

1. What is the question whose answer is all the group needs to know in order to accomplish its purpose?

2. What subquestions must be answered before we can answer the single question we have formulated?

3. Do we have sufficient information to answer the subquestions confidently? (If yes, answer them. If no, continue below.)

4. What are the most reasonable answers to the subquestions?

5. Assuming the answers to the subquestions are correct, what is the best solution to the problem?

The single question approach makes it essential that the group identify the specific question it is attempting to answer. It also demands that the discussants focus in on the issues that are central to the problem. By requiring a family to concentrate on the issues which are central in the selection of a school or schools, the approach facilitates and enhances the family's decision making process.

Team Research

Recent research by Carl Larson and Frank Lafasto on team effectiveness has resulted in the identification of characteristics which differentiate successful from less successful teams. A number of these factors might be considered by counselors when assisting a student and his or her family in the selection of schools to submit applications to or a school to attend.

The Larson and Lafasto findings suggest that it is essential that a family reach a clear understanding of the purpose of their discussion before they attempt to reach an agreement. If some discussants, for example, believe that they are attempting to identify the specific school the student should attend, while others believe that they are simply identifying schools to apply to, the family will have a difficult time reaching consensus. It is also important that the student's needs be placed above the desires or wishes of certain family members.

Only those family members or friends who are capable or competent enough to contribute to the discussion should actively participate in it. It may be difficult to exclude some individuals without hurting their feelings, but including individuals in the discussion who lack the motivation, understanding, or skills to contribute to the decision will seriously interfere with the quality of the outcome.

Care should be taken to identify and deal with hidden agendas. Someone, for example, who is negative about a school because of its location may hide the fact that location matters to him or her. This hidden agenda could interfere with the family's deliberations by placing personal concerns above the group's goal. It is also important that the family be able to work together in a collaborative manner and that their standards be both realistic and high.

Discussions should not be held until the family has the necessary information it needs to proceed. It is also essential that the counselor place the student's needs and the legitimate

concerns of the family above any conflicting personal agenda that the counselor might have.

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